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# Making Space for Animal Dwelling

*Worlding with Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson*

The creature gazes into openness with all  
its eyes. But our eyes are  
as if they were reversed, and surround it,  
everywhere, like barriers against its free passage.  
We know what is outside us from the animal's  
face alone

—RAINER MARIA RILKE, “Eighth Duino Elegy”

In the “Eighth Duino Elegy,” poet Rainer Maria Rilke describes the animal’s space that overlaps and haunts our own as a “nowhere without the no.”<sup>1</sup> We do not have access to this space, this nowhere, and yet it lingers in our presence “without the no.” Rilke points to the limit of knowing the animal and its world. His poem indicates a place without (human) knowing and yet not quite a nowhere. It is this same space that the artists Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson pursue in their collaborative artwork:

In general we aim to use our work to create debates and highlight awareness about the environments humans and animals inhabit and to create platforms to actively engage in a discourse on anthropocentric hierarchies in our societies with a view to open a space for what [Anne] Brydon quoting [Bruno] Latour calls “multinaturalism. Multinaturalism he posits as a collective community made up of both, human and non-humans.”<sup>2</sup>

Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson examine moments of friction between the animal and human worlds and frictions evident within cultural perception of how to negotiate the nonhuman, including hunting, urban development, and conservation. By examining moments of friction between us and animals, these artists make visible the space of the Other that resides as an open secret. We have seen this secret in chapter 1, where nature's "veil consists in having no veil; in other words, she hides because we do not know how to see her, although she is right before our eyes."<sup>3</sup> Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson reveal the parameters of the animal world while maintaining its unknowability.

In recent theoretical work, animal agency has been described as the look of the Other—a reversal of human optical supremacy by granting that animals look back at us from their own world and their own interiority or selfhood. While Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson employ vision in their work—particularly in their photographs—they have come upon a more fundamental mode of discourse by working with animal worlding that is over and against the primacy of vision. Too much of the discourse on vision carries with it cultural signification that reappropriates the animal and its agency according to anthropocentric valuing of sight and coding of vision. It is worth examining how this coding takes place, and how Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson both use it and break free of its limits.

### THE CREATURE GAZES

Animals look back at us, and in this look, the center and periphery as well as the interiority (of the human) and exterior (of the animal) gets misplaced. Traditionally, sight is possession at a distance: we take in to human interiority and reason the object of our gaze. When the animal looks back, the hegemony of human vision becomes confounded. The implication is that there is an "interior exterior" to the human, and that we are the subject now made object of an alien look.

John Berger, in "Why Look at Animals," and more recently Jacques Derrida, in his autobiographical "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," leverage the look of the animal toward a rethinking of the human arena:

The animal scrutinizes him [man] across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension. This is why the man can surprise the animal. Yet the animal—even if domesticated—can also surprise the man. The man too is looking across a similar, but not identical, abyss of non-comprehension. And this is so wherever he looks. He is always looking across ignorance and fear. And so, when he is *being seen* by the animal, he is being seen as his surroundings are seen by him.<sup>4</sup>

Animals look at us, and we are confounded by their radical otherness as well as the fact that we may be objects in their world as much as they are objects in ours. When animals look back at us, we must grant that there may be something of the animal's "self" we do not know. Derrida, in "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," uses the look from his cat as the point where thought begins. The reflection emerges from a moment when the philosopher is naked and his cat looks at him.<sup>5</sup> In the exchange of glances between himself and the animal, and through reflection on his own nakedness, Derrida begins a bridge in thought across the human-animal divide. The cat under his roof reminds the thinker of the otherness of all animals, and moreover for the philosopher without clothes, it reveals the otherness that seems forgotten within the human.

Nakedness and the animal body of the human work as a necessary supplement. As Steve Baker explains in *The Postmodern Animal*: "Precisely as an alternative to Descartes's 'I think therefore I am,' Derrida proposes the formulation: 'The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. And thinking perhaps begins there.'"<sup>6</sup> The "there" in Derrida's statement works as a deferral and displacement of the ground that authorizes thought by holding thought in abeyance until one can resolve the placement of the there and here—the placement of the animal outside man that serves as the traditional foil to the interiority of human thought, and the problematic "here" of the human that is both rational and animal. Yet this holding of thought in abeyance is itself the gesture of thought in which Derrida must consider the role of the animal in philosophy and the place of his own disrobed human animality. In the look of the animal, the center of the environment moves outside the human and

gets placed upon the multiple centers of the many “eyes” out “there.” As a consequence, human identity finds its “I” in the eyes of the Other. By using the language of “the look,” however, we reinscribe the animal interior and its Otherness within the domain of visual culture. Unfortunately, the look already points to human interiority: the depths and heights of our coded special languages from linear perspective to Cartesian perspectivalism and on to the Lacanian imaginary and symbolic.<sup>7</sup>

Even more pressing than the look from animals is their physicality and surfaces of contact. An actual encounter with an animal means physical proximity and (near) contact with the flesh of the animal Other. Humans consider the raw physicality of contact to be a most animal characteristic and one least intelligible within human cultural codes. If for Derrida human thinking begins in the regard of the animal, to move this notion further, contact with animals provides a possibility to think *with* them.<sup>8</sup> Donna Haraway has begun to explore the implication of contact with animals in *When Species Meet*. In reading Derrida’s encounter with his cat, she comments:

Positive knowledge of and with animals might just be possible, knowledge that is positive in quite a radical sense if it is not built on the Great Divides. Why did Derrida not ask, even in principle, if a Gregory Bateson or Jane Goodall or Marc Bekoff or Barbara Smuts or many others had met the gaze of living, diverse animals and in response undid and redid themselves and their sciences? Their kind of positive knowledge might even be what Derrida would recognize as a mortal and finite knowing that understands “the absence of the name as something other than a privation.” Why did Derrida leave unexamined the practices of communication outside of the writing technologies he did know how to talk about?<sup>9</sup>

Haraway suggests there is much to be gleaned from the physicality of encounters. The shock of physicality in contact with animals turns against the distance of visual enframing of animals; physicality enlivens the surface of the animal body as something other than an object enframed by human

desires. The question pursued in the following pages is how art might evade the primacy of visual hegemony in order to employ the shock of the physicality and what Haraway calls “positive knowledge.” As a consequence, art may come to the aid of philosophy in rethinking the space of multinaturalism where, as Derrida claims, “thinking perhaps begins.”

While I want to pursue the physicality of encounter for art in the manner Haraway develops it for science and cultural studies in *When Species Meet*, it is worth providing some nuance to Haraway’s demands vis-à-vis Derrida. Her investigation—and my own as well—has been opened up (rather than evaded) by Derrida’s work. Haraway takes to task Derrida for not focusing on a “positive knowledge” of animals and cites examples of such knowledge by listing a number of scientists. It is not clear why Derrida should be tasked to address scientific engagement with animals—which is Haraway’s interest—when his own interest is a philosophical inquiry into animality. In terms of philosophy and with reverberations well beyond the philosophical, Derrida has provided steps toward thinking alongside animals. In “On Eating Well” and “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” he develops the moral voice of animals; those that suffer communicate through their suffering and function as moral agents whose voice should be recognized by the human community. More broadly, Derrida’s work on the opacity and multivalent modalities of communication provides a groundwork for Haraway’s own pursuit of interspecies communication as well as my interest in human–animal hybrid language and modes of comportment. His insistence on breaking a singular mode of discourse opens the possibility for thinking nonhuman communication, the contact zones and pidgin languages developed in this and subsequent chapters.

#### FROM SIGHT TO SITE

Consider Thomas Nagel’s curious question—“What is it like to be a bat?”—from his 1974 essay of the same title. Nagel’s work is primarily in philosophy of mind and ethics. In this essay, he confronts the problem of foreign subjectivities: What it is like to be a bat—or, for that matter, any other animal? With

this question, he sets a horizon for human knowing. We can describe bat life and behavior, but “we can be compelled to recognize the existence of such facts *without being able to state or comprehend them*.”<sup>10</sup> That is to say, there is something it is like to be a bat, but what that something is remains beyond our comprehension. What we fail to comprehend is the subjective character of the experience. We can know what it is like for a human to imagine being a bat, but not know what it means for a bat to be a bat—the concern under question. Nagel continues: “existence of facts like this whose exact nature we cannot possibly conceive” does not mean “there is not anything precise that it is like” to be a bat or a human or a Martian.<sup>11</sup> Nagel’s point here is “there are facts that do not consist in the . . . move from subjective to objective character.”<sup>12</sup> The problem is that while most facts move from sense impressions to objective general effects and properties (independent of the senses), “experience itself, however, does not seem to fit the pattern.”<sup>13</sup> The move to objectivity does not take us nearer to the phenomena of a subjective experience, “what it is like,” which is the very thing we want to know and the thing closed off by objectivity.

We can translate experience of an object between species only through the objective character of the object; however, as Nagel notes, “we cannot ignore [the species-specific point of view] permanently, since it is the essence of the internal world.”<sup>14</sup> In short, translation and representation fail at some point: we do not have the conceptual schema to make sense of the subjective facts of this other creature nor to comprehend its “internal world.”

Jakob von Uexküll seems to circumvent the problem of inaccessible animal experience discussed in Nagel. Uexküll is a founding figure in ethnology; later, biosemioticians claim him as a key thinker in their field.<sup>15</sup> In his 1934 monograph *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Men*, Uexküll moves beyond mechanistic biology to develop a line of inquiry into the animal’s sense of its surroundings, something close to an animal phenomenology.<sup>16</sup> He tries to push the limits of the limit of what we can know; that is, he challenges not simply the limit—claiming we can know more—but also the schema that delimits or sets the parameters for understanding another creature. He does

this by more or less bracketing out the interiority of the animal: he doesn't want to know "what it is like *to be* . . .," nor is he interested in the subjective being in the same way Nagel is. He asks instead, in *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Men* and then in *A Theory of Meaning*, what is the earth like for a tick, a fly, or a chicken, to mention just a few of the animals he considers in his essay. Uexküll begins by explaining that humans and animals occupy the same earth but live in different worlds. Observation of what matters to other animals can give us a sense of their world. He gestures toward an animal phenomenology.

Uexküll can make inquiries about animals' worlds by noticing what the animal responds to, and how it responds. What is the world of a tick? In this well-known example, he points out that the tick responds to three items, each of which is referred to as a "mark" or "carrier of significance" in its world: the odor of butyric acid found in mammal sweat; the temperature of mammal blood; and the texture of mammal hair.<sup>17</sup> Each of these three items is a carrier of significance for the tick, a mark in its world. Anything outside of this set does not register for the animal. For example, the tick will eat any liquid that is the temperature of mammal blood, of roughly 98 degrees Fahrenheit, but other properties of the liquid are not registered by its preceptors. Uexküll's terminology specifically evades issues of intentionality and subjectivity: the animal notices elements of the earth through preceptors and reacts to this world through its effectors. He explains, using a gastronomical example: "We are not interested in what taste sensations the raisins produces in the gourmet but only in the fact that they become perception marks of his environment because they are of special biological significance for him."<sup>18</sup> Contra Nagel's inquiry, Uexküll explains: "The relations of the subject to the objects of its surroundings, whatever the nature of these relations may be, play themselves out outside the subject, in the very place where we have to look for the perception marks."<sup>19</sup>

Consider, then, two brief examples from Uexküll that are suggestively rich in what shall be turned to next, the role of surfaces in human–animal relations as deployed by Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson. The first addresses the



immanence of the animal's world, and the second the wonder of such a world: "All animal subjects, from the simplest to the most complex, are inserted into their environments to the same degree of perfection."<sup>20</sup> One example is the spider and its web: "Every subject spins out, like the spider's threads, its relations to certain qualities of things and weaves them into a solid web, which carries its existence."<sup>21</sup> Giorgio Agamben, in *The Open*, comments on this passage by saying:

The spider knows nothing about the fly, nor can it measure its client as a tailor does before sewing his suit. And yet it determines the length of the stitches in its web according to the dimensions of the fly's body, and it adjusts the resistance of the threads in exact proportion to the force of impact of the fly's body in flight. . . . [T]he most surprising fact is that the threads of the web are exactly proportioned to the visual capacity of the eye of the fly, who cannot see them and therefore flies toward death unawares. The two perceptual worlds of the fly and the spider are absolutely uncommunicating, and yet so perfectly in tune that we might say that the original score of the fly . . . acts on that of the spider in such a way that the web the spider weaves can be described as "fly-like."<sup>22</sup>

To call the spider and fly relationship "absolutely uncommunicating" misses the shifts in species over time and limits what we call communication. Arguably, the physical relationship is an important means of communicating that the spider seems quite satisfied with, the fly less so.<sup>23</sup> However, Agamben's larger point is well taken: the spider does not measure the fly's body, it just does its spinning. The animals are in a world that Georges Bataille characterizes as "like water in water," or a world so closely tied to the animal that it cannot hoist a ladder of transcendence and climb out. It cannot attain a verticality by which it would get outside its world to have a look around; in other words, the spider does not think "fly." The animal is trapped in "captivation" according to Uexküll; it lives on the surface of relations without self-conscious reflexive thought.

Moving from immanence of the world for a fly, an immanence like water in water, to wonder, consider a passage from the opening of Uexküll's monograph on walking between human and animal worlds:

The present booklet does not claim to serve as the introduction to a new science. Rather, it only contains what one might call the description of a walk into unknown worlds. These worlds are not only unknown; they are also invisible. . . . We begin such a stroll on a sunny day before a flowering meadow in which insects buzz and butterflies flutter, and we make a bubble around each of the animals living the meadow. The bubble represents each animal's environment and contains all the features accessible to the subject. As soon as we enter into one such bubble, the previous surroundings of the subject are completely reconfigured. Many qualities of the colorful meadow vanish completely, others lose their coherence with one another, and new connections are created. A new world arises in each bubble.<sup>24</sup>

In what reads like a hallucinatory vision, the animal world remains a place that can be translated to the human, but in doing so, it will be distorted. The translation is never quite right, and parts of the animals' worlds seem stubbornly resistant to our understanding. There is an important friction between our attempt to assimilate the animal world and its foreignness; moreover, should the animal world be taken seriously as meaningful rather than of lesser value than human worlding, then the hallucinations in this opening passage become quite disturbing for the human because it puts ontology and human valuation off balance.

Not all of Uexküll's work evades anthropocentrism. In fact, as we shall see in chapter 4, Heidegger (who borrows the term *Umwelt* from Uexküll) deploys precisely the anthropocentric moments in Uexküll that I am consciously omitting for strategic reasons in this chapter. Uexküll and Heidegger assume that the human world is larger than the animal world: "The animal's environment [*Umwelt*], which we want to investigate now, is only a piece cut out of its surroundings, which we see stretching out on all sides around the

animal—and these surroundings are nothing else but our own, human environment.”<sup>25</sup> If only Uexküll had said that our perceptual space was “nothing but our own animal world,” then things could have been different. Second, the illustrations for Uexküll’s essay imply a privation on the part of animals. The beautiful image at the opening paragraph, where we step into a bubble, is a bit misleading: we are already in the animal’s *Umwelt*, but don’t see from its perspective; if we could, the “strangeness” that is suggested by Uexküll is not there. It is only there if the translation between *Umwelts* is not complete; that is, the animal’s world is strange if we “see” it (that is, understand it) with human eyes and a human mind. Such human understanding brings us back to questions of interiority, human interiority, and comprehension.<sup>26</sup>

Overall, several lessons can be learned from Uexküll that will lead us along our own stroll:

- The world can be assessed through effects outside the subject. We can look for perceptual cues to understand the animal’s world.
- The animal is fitted to its world such that there is no poverty of world for the animal as perceived within its *Umwelt*.
- The animal’s world creates for us a sense of wonder. It is suggestively familiar and translatable, while in crucial ways remains stubbornly remote. Failures in translation create opportunities for reevaluating the privileged interiority of the human subject.

Based on Uexküll, I would like to suggest a particular means of inquiry for animal studies and assess its utility in relation to other ways of engaging animals. Readers will notice that in Nagel and Uexküll, the concern has been the meeting of two worlds, two *Umwelts*, two phenomenologies: the animal and the human. It is this site—the meeting, abutting, and jamming of two worlds—that is under investigation in each case: a site that produces thinking and that stretches the limits of thought and representation in novel ways. This is a move specifically contrary to a hegemony of vision and a privileged interiority of the subject.

## WORLDING

Philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari warn against figuring domesticated animals as oedipalized members of the family:

individuated animals, family pets, sentimental, Oedipal animals each with its own petty history, “my” cat, “my” dog. These animals invite us to regress, draw us into narcissistic contemplations, and they are the only kind of animal psychoanalysis understands, the better to discover a daddy, a mommy, a little brother behind them.

We have socialized other species, brought them into our world, our *Umwelt*, and into our (psychological) dramas. We have, in brief, domesticated them. Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson’s project *(a)fly* (2006) tugs at the tethers of domestication by which we bind select animals to ourselves.<sup>27</sup> Their work makes strange and unfamiliar the domestic scene where pets and humans live together. By re-presenting us with animal and human dwelling, the project invites viewers to think of the world of the animal, and to imagine the life of the animal in itself. How do these animals among us live, dwell, and think? What is their space—uniquely undisclosed—outside the confines of human narcissistic appropriation of the animal’s world? Unlike wild animals or farm animals, pets live distinctly both within our world and in a space that is their own. *(a)fly* is poised at the horizon between these two worlds.

The way we think about animals establishes a particular way of seeing them in the world, in our world. What are its “secrets” that remain inaccessible to us? Domestic animals, “pets” as we are fond of calling (to) them, house for themselves seething multitudes of points of view that work below the surface of our own seeing like an open secret. An encounter with the animal is a moment in which we come to recognize an animal world, a moment when we are the object “over there.” In this look from another species, we realize there are more points of view than our own, and that there are other optical and spatial phenomenologies than our all-too-familiar human ones; indeed, animals and humans occupy the same earth and spaces but have different

worlds, different *Umwelts*. (*a*)fly makes the issue of worlds even more pronounced because these animals physically share a very intimate place on earth with humans: the home. These animals, these pets, reside in our home, like a fly in our soup; but seen from other (animal) eyes, are we not in theirs?

In (*a*)fly, Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson photograph domestic spaces in Reykjavík though from a unique perspective. The photographs are of the spaces in people's homes where "their" animals dwell; these spaces may be a dog bed, a cat corner, a fishbowl, a pile of clothes under the stairs, and so on. The photographs do not include the animals—only their settings (Plate 1 and Figure 12). The absences of the actual animals haunt this work. We wonder, what sort of beast is it that would live here? Does it have claws or paws or fins, beak or muzzle, shell or fur or feathers or scales? Such musings invite



FIGURE 12 Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, *Mosi*, from (*a*)fly, Lambda print, 2005.

us into the world of the animal. We begin to consider how the claws, paws, and tails maneuver in this venue and what they think about the environment around them. We ponder the animals' "interface" with the earth and in so doing, grant animals a face and a dignity of being. Therefore in these images, viewers must negotiate the often oedipalized human expectations of pets with the question of what the animals perceive. There is an uncomfortable fit between the animal's residual space in the human's habitat and the photograph that makes the animal's place central. Snæbjörnsdóttir explains that when they are invited into a home, they do not photograph the well-kept family rooms or the front facade of the house; rather, they photograph seemingly inconsequential corners, washrooms, stairs, and ledges—the places of the animals.<sup>28</sup> If the animal is considered to be at the margins of the family picture, then the images provided in *(a)fly* reverse the center and periphery: now, in *(a)fly*, these beasts that we let live with us begin to take over; they are the centers of their worlds, for which our domiciles are the periphery. Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson thus force the question: "From whose world (*Umwelt*) are we seeing this place?" No longer are we keeping the animal at a safe and objective distance for artistic representation and natural history observation; knowledge comes instead from the displacement of perspective, and from the uncomfortable haunting provided by the surface of another world that lingers as a remainder in our own.

Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson work in the margin between the animal world and the human world. They do not provide a perspective from the animal's point of view, nor solely from the human's. In this they differ from artists such as Per Maning, whose black-and-white video *Breather* (2000) depicts cattle in a field seemingly videoed from a grazing cow's point of view. With the photographs from *(a)fly*, we are suspended and left to wonder, to question what it means to dwell and just who is dwelling with whom? To appreciate the liminal in their work, it is worth considering how this art opens up the world of the animal but refuses to represent, to speak for, other species.

The diligent reader of Uexküll's work and the attentive viewer of *(a)fly* perceive the loss of unitary space and time and come to see that our own human

world is yet another bubble with distortions and omissions (Figure 13). Uexküll presents an infinite variety of perceptual worlds that are “manifold and varied as the animals themselves”; each animal species holds its own point of view and its own distortions of the actual earth. These perspectives reflect how the body of the animal has evolved over ages to adapt to the earth and meet the animal’s needs. We are left with the understanding that there is no single unitary world, and no unified space or time; instead, time moves differently for each species, and each animal senses and shapes space quite differently. For our “pets,” how long is the time between our going to work and our coming home? How are corners and ledges shaped for a cat, and shaped by it? Here in our most intimate place—our home—we find that our bubble and our world overlaps with another’s.



FIGURE 13 Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, *Snúlla Púkapúk*, from *(a)fly*, Lambda print, 2005.

There is an important reversal at work in the overlap of domestic *Umwelts*. Even as we have tried to domesticate animals, *(a)fly* looks into their dwellings and recalls the very animality within the human. These “pets” have animalized us as—in a perspectival shift—our homes become cultured animal dwellings in which we human animals bed with the fur and flesh of other beasts. Human dwelling is the joining of cultural refinement and basic animal needs. Fine furnishings reflect social decorum and (good) taste; yet at their most fundamental level, the human bed, the fireplace, the kitchen all center around our animal nature. Introducing animals within the space of human dwelling complicates our own sense of place and sense of identity, of what it means to be a human animal. Displacement of perspective and disorientation provided by these images go to the heart of what it means to dwell. In English, the origin of the verb “to dwell” is the Old English word *dwalde*, meaning “to go astray.” Perhaps Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson show us more clearly what it means to dwell by these seemingly stray pictures, these observations of the everydayness of animals’ places among us. It is the familiar made wild, or the blurring of animal space and cultural space, that fits with these artists’ overall projects.<sup>29</sup> Dwelling becomes “a stroll into unfamiliar worlds,” including our own.

The haunting of this animal world, its spectral presence woven within our lives, is manifest not only in the images from *(a)fly*, but more so within the larger choices, interventions, and parameters of the project. Initially, the artists had conceived an *Animal Radio*—a proposed twenty-four-hour radio broadcast with the sounds of animals cutting through the airwaves. Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson describe this cycle of the project as

[a] programme of events [that] will include interviews with animal specialists in Reykjavík, from the pest-control department, to veterinary practices, hunters, etc. It will also feature live interviews with passers-by, whom it is hoped will relate anecdotes about their relationship with their pets and indeed any other animals in their experience. At such times when there is neither a scheduled programme nor an interview going on, the station will air the sounds of indigenous and non-indigenous beasts to be found in the City.<sup>30</sup>



The *Animal Radio* project was put off for logistical reasons, but it has returned (slightly renamed) in their latest work, tentatively titled *Pests, Pets, and Prey* (2008–9). The sounds of animals move through the airwaves as we sleep, and the noise can be heard if one has proper instruments and knows how to tune in and listen. Indeed, these bubbled worlds of the animal are already among us, and the one-night broadcast (like a temporary coup) simply highlights their presence. The dialogue with those who heal or kill animals—from veterinarians to hunters—extends the conversation. We hear from other humans in our language what it is like to be intimately tied to the life of animals. Layer upon layer of a multinaturalism builds. One can imagine how a hunter must enter into the animal world and the animal mind in order to stalk them, or how a veterinarian understands the curious habits of local beasts. The project takes on a sociological dimension as we hear the various and contradictory approaches to animals within the citizenry.

Later in his essay on the stroll through animal worlds Uexküll explains: “Through the bubble we see the world of the burrowing worm, of the butterfly, or of the field mouse: the world as it appears to the animals themselves, not as it appears to us. This we may call the *phenomenal world* or the *self-world* of the animal. To some, these worlds are invisible.”<sup>31</sup> Inasmuch as the animals’ worlds are unknown to us they remain a “nowhere,” but as explored and recovered by (*a*)fly, the images reveal a “nowhere without the no.” We cannot know this “no” through direct investigation and interrogation of the animal or its dwellings (its “going astray”); indeed, only by upending the groundedness of home and recalling the stray (animal) in our own dwelling can we obliquely glimpse another’s abode. Tracking the animals’ worlds, we can begin to understand an “outside us” that is in our very midst.

## FLAT OUT

Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson’s most ambitious project has been to hunt down all of the taxidermied polar bears of the United Kingdom, photograph them in situ, catalog their providence, and then gather as many of these bears as possible into a contemporary gallery space. They found thirty-four stuffed

bears (and have since uncovered a few more in private collections), and exhibited ten of them at Spike Island Gallery (Plate 2). As a project, *nanoq: flat out and bluesome* extends from the searching for and photographing of the bears, to the gallery exhibition, to gallery talks, and to publishing their work and the ongoing cataloging of new finds.

The work's title is a poetic pidgin language: *nanoq* is the Greenland term for "polar bear"; "flat out" has a double meaning, first referring to "the pace of the project and the particularity of trips we were making across and up and down the country in pursuit of the polar bear specimens," and second, "to the skin of the animal, after the killing or death and before the taxidermic process has been undertaken, which in respect of the project, constituted a pivotal space between 'nature' and 'culture.'"<sup>32</sup> The skin of the animal functions as a surface of contact and resistance. It is a veil: on one side is a living bear with its depth of world and life that remains unknown, while on the other side is the bear as perceived, captured, and killed by humans. The veil is torn, removed from its animal and placed within a cultural economy of meaning, geopolitics, and capital. Its very flatness as a surface marks the negotiation of *Umwelts* and the mixing of nature and culture. The skin will be appropriated as an object of natural history—a figure for science and education as well as for trophies and displays of power. The bear flattened in death—down and out and "bluesome"—is then hoisted into a cultural life through the scaffolding of the sculptural stuffing of the animal.

The taxidermied bear poses in the nineteenth century were often of the animal fully vertical, on hind legs and showing teeth and claws in a sign of power, or power conquered by human hunters. Such, for example, is the case with the two bears shot by Sir Savile Crossley, the first Lord Somerleyton, and that are on display as "guardians" of the vestibule of the Somerleyton ancestral home in Suffolk (Figure 14). The fur is no longer the flat surface of contact between human and animal worlds, with all the abrasiveness and frictions and productivity of such an encounter; it is now an object made vertical to match the metaphysical uprightness of human transcendence outside the world of animals and into the world of nature and rational thought.

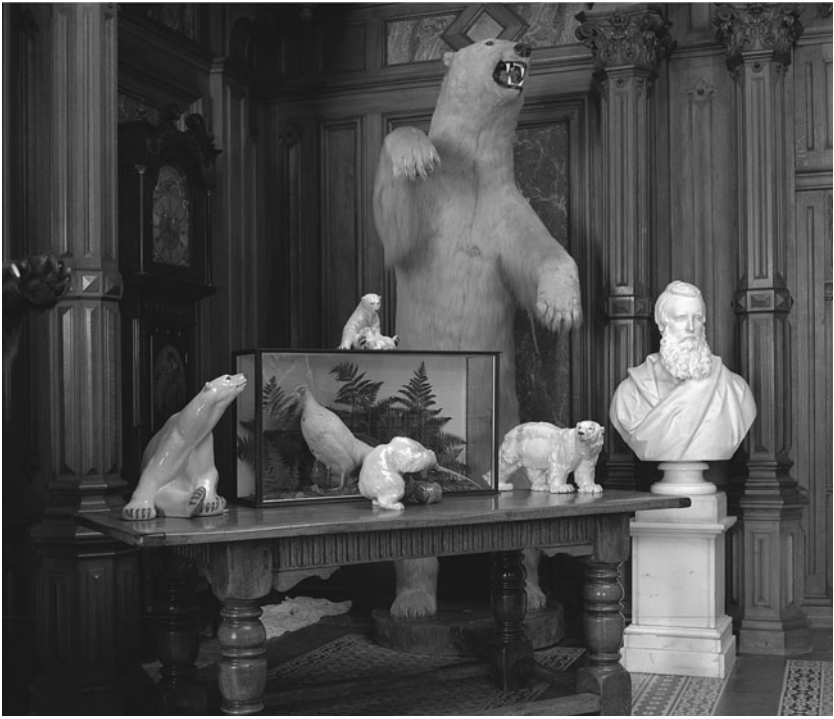


FIGURE 14 Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, *Somerleyton* (one of a pair of polar bear mounts at Somerleyton Hall), from *nanoq: flat out and bluesome*, Lambda print, 2004.

These polar bear forms become “things trying very hard to be polar bears” or “renewed objects representing polar bear-ness” to and for a culture.<sup>33</sup>

At the same time that the skin is given a vertical (metaphysical) architecture, it is gutted from any animal interior and any animal worlding. The bear’s world and worlding are replaced with straw, hay, wood timbers, and hollow sculpted forms. Over time, these manufactured interiors change to match cultural perceptions of the animal—from the beastly vicious and wild, to mimicking the stance and musculature of actual bears, to the Disneyesque (as with Lord Puttnam’s bear of 1999). Baker unpacks the valences of these works:

It is also a space with both surfaces and interiors; as the artists have written, the spectacle of the bears presented a beautiful veneer beneath which lay a conundrum oscillating backwards and forwards between nature and culture, taking in all manner of aspects of human achievement, endeavor, cruelty and folly on the way.<sup>34</sup>

Through contact with this “veneer,” the artists find a site of production:

Much has been written on the hollowness of souvenirs, their intrinsic sadness and the ultimate futility of collecting things by which we seek to remember places and events. . . . If we handle or knock expectantly on the surface of something stolen long ago, we can expect to hear the dull thud of its disembodiment, its unmediated physicality, in short, what it is—not what it was or what we think or thought it was. Or, if we listen more closely we may hear the ring and echo of a much larger set of truths, only one of which will be indicative of its current condition and only one of which will be, or correspond in part with what we thought its significance to be. We may find a multitude of narratives and interlocking fragments, redolent not only of what has transpired, its dislocation, journey and its second life, but inevitably, if only by implication, of what else might have been.<sup>35</sup>

The whole of *nanoq: flat out and bluesome* is this knocking at the surface of an animal world. In the case of these polar bears taxidermied over the last 200 years, the rap against the world produces a hollow sound. It is the “bluesome” sound of “what else might have been” in the now-inaccessible past of this particular animal’s world and the uncertain future of the species. The “multitude of narratives” is possible only through preventing the “unmediated physicality” of the animal surface from being appropriated by any particular cultural narrative—as trophy, conquest, science, violation, or even kitsch.

By not giving in to any particular set of narratives, Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson show a restraint that allows space for the “nowhere without the no” of an animal world. They happen upon glimpses of such a world throughout

their hunt for stuffed bears from 2001 to 2004. Particularly haunting are the lantern-slide images from Sir Savile Crossley's 1897 polar venture unearthed by the present Lord Somerleyton and first printed for the *nanoq* project. While at Wiches Land near Spitsbergen, Norway, the expedition killed fifty-five bears and captured two for zoos. In the slides, light contacting the film has exposed a moment of another space and time and a foreign (seemingly alien) way of being in an extreme environment. Shooting the bears with a camera captures and preserves them and their moment of contact with humans.<sup>36</sup> The images foreshadow the more deadly rifle shots that will subsume the animal life—consume its life within the human world.<sup>37</sup> The concept of *exposure* here is crucial: the animals are exposed through photography, but also they carry a physical exposure and vulnerability that haunts all that happens to the animal body—from the event of the photograph, to the shooting, skinning, taxidermy, and afterlife as sculptured remains.

In several of the bears cataloged by Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson, the bullet holes are still evident.<sup>38</sup> The scars of the event by which they enter into our cultural life—their entry into a human world—become unseemly reminders that they occupied a space and a worlding outside of human culture. As Gary Marvin notes in his essay for the *nanoq* project:

Prior to the shots which kill hunted polar bears they had a corporeality of their own—one which was their own concern—the hunter intrudes and attempts to make them his own. . . . The embodied bear was necessary for there to be a hunt but now its body is unnecessary for the next transformation and for the beginning of its new, cultural life. The organic, fleshy body stands in the way of that transformation and must be removed and discarded. All that is needed to create or recreate the polar bear is its surface—taxi (arrangement)—dermi (skin). It emerges from a disembodied bear with its “bear-ness” somehow hovering close to its skin.<sup>39</sup>

The surface yields witness to the animals' exposure. Indeed, the surface has always been the site of exposure, the place of interface for the polar bear and

its world. It is not that the animals have “a corporeality of their own” in the sense of self-reflexive possession. An interiority of the animal world serves as a pitfall for the animal as much as it does for humans. Rather, it is on the surface that the polar bear’s worlding and terrain develops. In the case of *nanoq*, the surface of the animal and the animal’s *Umwelt* has abutted the asymmetrical force of the hunter’s world. Of the bears amassed in the United Kingdom, the more tattered and worn ones, the unseemly ones and ones with seams undone, rupture the taxidermic illusion of a liveness and recall the history of their production (Figure 15). They unravel to another time and space that is no longer—a nowhere, but yet a haunting of “what else



FIGURE 15 Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, *Blair Atholl* (polar bear skin over wooden support), dated 1786, from *nanoq: flat out and bluesome*, Lambda print, 2004.

might have been” and what elsewhere in the globe still is—an animal world unfathomed by human huntings.

Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson photograph the polar bears in their afterlife in natural history museums and private collections. Some gather dust in attics; the bear at the Eureka Museum for Children in Halifax is covered by a rug and props up a bicycle (Plate 3); the Somerset bear stands in an alcove while holding a basket of flower-shaped lights and wearing a fez. Their worlding has gone “flat out and bluesome.” Unlike the lantern slides of Victorian explorers, the artists’ photographs, as well as their staging of the exhibition at Spike Island, not only expose the bears, but also expose the humans. We become aware of how we enframe animals within our world. The adept viewers see their vulnerability in the rough seams and the unseemly enframing. Without the didacticism of Hirst’s work, viewers quietly become aware of “the physical exposure to vulnerability and mortality that we suffer because we, like animals, are embodied beings.”<sup>40</sup> It is in such moments of disorientation—a dwelling and wandering—that we find a space for animal worlding amid our own world.

One of the trademarks of Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson’s work has been that while they engage with the question of animals, they do not produce representations of living animals in their work. So, for example, in *nanoq* there is no animal but representations made by hunters and taxidermists. By omitting any interaction with live animals, the artists put aside the most difficult of questions—how to discuss the event of encounter itself—and leave in its place a series of anthropological investigations of human representations of animals. Their work is, perhaps, less about animal encounters than the human representations in the wake of such an event. The potency of the event itself is mourned in these works where we see the poverty of the taxidermied skin (in *nanoq*) and the emptiness of the pet’s home without the animal in the picture (in the *(a)fly* project).

## COMMUNITY

I should like to end this chapter with a brief reflection on the issue of community, a concern developed in subsequent chapters’ discussion of pidgin



languages. Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson's work is process driven. They log many long days talking with a variety of people whose lives intersect those of the animals under investigation. Certainly in *nanoq* they talked with museum curators and taxidermists, but also with hunters, anthropologists, and private collectors. In their more current work, *Uncertainty in the City* (2010), they talk to a range of people in Morecambe Bay, from a man who feeds pigeons, to pest exterminators, to city planners and architects. This work, shown at the Storey Institute and Gallery in Lancaster, considers the variety of discourses and physical effects of wild animals living in urban environments. In their conversations with a range of concerned citizens and animal experts, it becomes evident that the urban animals are perceived variously as pests by some, and as wildlife to be enjoyed or preserved by others. This friction of the animal world bumping against the human is highlighted by the differences within the community, which is aired on the *Radio Animal* (2009–10) full-day program broadcast locally and online. Amid these differences in discourse and their material and policy implications, the world of the animal fractures as much as it draws together the human world. Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson work in the openings created by this abrasive abutting and overlapping of worlds. Their art is a rope across an abyss of differences between the various human and animal worlds.

Ralph Acampora characterizes the urban animal environment as a “somatic society of species.” In his essay on phenomenology and animals, “Bodily Being and Animal World,” he uses what phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls “world flesh” to describe what it would mean to “be in the world” with other species. Shared climaticity, or general feel of space (flesh of the world), creates a living with, or *Mitsein*. In his example, he describes the sensate and aural sharing of a New York park with cicadas in the “sweaty hours of afternoon” when space is indeed thick and fleshy; yet there is little exchange between cicada and human. There is no contact, and there are no marks or remarks on each other's worlds. Rather, the human hears the animal at a distance, and the animal remains stubbornly oblivious to the human. They share a space and a climate, but they do not negotiate an economy of



signs or physicality. While both human and cicada feel the weather in their own way—with sweat or song—neither barter with the other.

Acampora's phrase "somatic society of species" then deserves some adjustments.<sup>41</sup> Societies are founded on exchange. The term itself—*society*—purports a unity among citizens. Acampora admits that this unity is rather tentative, or what he calls a "fractious holism," borrowing the term from Jane Bennett. He goes on to qualify his claim by explaining that "terrestrial carnality (world–flesh/earth–home) is not experienced as an undifferentiated or placid whole. Rather it is fraught with all the existential tensions arising out of its spatio-temporal division into relatively individuated organisms and biomes."<sup>42</sup> He suggestively extends this existential tension to the "skin-boundary" as a "surface of contact."<sup>43</sup> Yet while Acampora points to the cracks or fractures evident between what Uexküll would call different animal *Umwelts*, he does not explain how this results in a holism as a society, a community and its operations. It is worth investigating how raw physicality can be more than proximity; it can be an economy of exchange, a notion I'll pursue further in chapters 4 and 5.

We have seen the internal division and fracturing in the figure of the satyr. At the level of community, the *communis*—or that which circulates or is held in common—itself fractures around the rapport with animals and the abysmal interiority of what Derrida calls "the animal that therefore I am." Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson expose these fault lines as their art presents the haunting specter of animal worlding and our negotiations with these animal worlds. Be it domestic pet, beastly polar bear or urban critter, the artists record and reflect on the various human discourses and discords these animals and their *Umwelts* stir within the community. Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson risk a certain fragility in their opening to an animal worlding. They risk folly of pursuing spaces of the nonhuman and bringing these worlds into dialogue with the *communis*. And they risk the social discord that follows in the wake of introducing and highlighting the animal worlds among us—alien worlds on an earth we share with them. The artist work reveals as well that the animals risk and are at risk through a variety of ways human dwell among them—be it in the arctic, in urban streets, or at home.